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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

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STATEMENT BY KEVIN RYAN REGARDING DEATH OF JMEIR WHITE

On August 22, 2004, at approximately 4:15 p.m., Tahija Handberry of Asbury Park, New Jersey, called 911 to request emergency first aid attention for her non-responsive, 14-month-old son, Jmeir White. The child was deceased and rigor mortis had begun to set in when the emergency responders arrived. The exact cause of Jmeir's death is chronic malnutrition-homicide. At the time of his death, Jmeir weighed only 10.4 pounds, a thirty percent (30%) weight loss from his last recorded weight of 15 pounds in March. The Division of Youth and Family Services (DYFS) history includes a single referral on the family, which occurred on June 23, 2004. An intake worker from the Southern Monmouth District Office visited the family that day, viewed all of the children, and closed the case on July 16, 2004. The Monmouth County Prosecutor's Office has charged Jmeir's parents with aggravated manslaughter and endangering the welfare of a child.

The Office of the Child Advocate is concluding a three-month investigation into the child welfare system's involvement with Jmeir prior to his death. We define child welfare system to include his pediatrician, the state child protection agency, local health providers and his community. Consistent with the requirements of our authorizing statute, we will release complete investigative findings in December.

Because this tragedy involves a situation where DYFS was involved with this family briefly during the period of Jmeir's alleged chronic malnutrition, we are today reiterating our concern that the child protection system continues to suffer from a lack of coordination with respect to medical information for children at risk of abuse and neglect. Our recent audit of the health care records of foster children from the same DYFS District Office that served Jmeir revealed an overall lack of health information, compromising DYFS' efforts to protect children. Jmeir's death is disturbing both because of the slow, painful way he died, and the failure of the child welfare system to save him.